



Reading between the lines

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3 **READING BETWEEN THE LINES: THE EPIGRAPHY OF CENTRAL BELIZE**

Christophe Helmke

Generally, sites of Central Belize are not renowned for their ancient glyphic texts. Yet, on account of the longevity of investigations, since the pioneering work of Linton Satterthwaite, A.H. Anderson and Gordon R. Willey in the 1950s, and owing to the proliferation of archaeological projects working at a number of sites in the region, this picture has been changing in recent decades. During the Classic Period, ancient courts of Central Belizean sites were increasingly drawn into ever-larger networks of allegiance and embroiled in wars against neighbouring polities. A cumulative vantage of the epigraphic evidence allows for the presentation of a synthesis of the political history of the region. This paper builds on the foundations set by earlier studies and presents some of the more recent epigraphic finds made in Central Belize, within a larger historical vantage of the area.

Background

Central Belize is not especially renowned for its carved monuments and glyphic texts. Nevertheless, carved monuments have been found at a variety of sites, in addition to portable objects bearing texts. In part, the quantity of carved monuments and texts may be the product of the relative abundance and small size of polities in the region (Helmke and Awe 2012; LeCount and Yaeger 2010). Because many of these monuments celebrate important ritual events and historical turning points, and text-bearing objects are in large measure diagnostic of influential courts, these together serve as proxies for historical and socio-political processes of the region. A sequential presentation of these monuments and objects—even if these are sparse and provide only a partial record—thereby offers a chronological outline to better track the actions of particularly charismatic kings and influential royal courts in the region.

Central Belize as a cultural region is here defined—and set in opposition to Northern and Southern Belize—by hydrology and watersheds. These form regions that are geologically and physiographically more uniform within, with prominent topography and marshy lowlands delineating and separating these as ridgelines, with larger waterways defining major arteries of travel and transport within each region, in antiquity. Thus, Central Belize is defined by the watershed formed by the two largest rivers, namely the Belize and the Sibun, with their many tributaries (Figure 1). In much the same way, Northern Belize can be defined by its hydrological region, formed by the Rio Hondo,

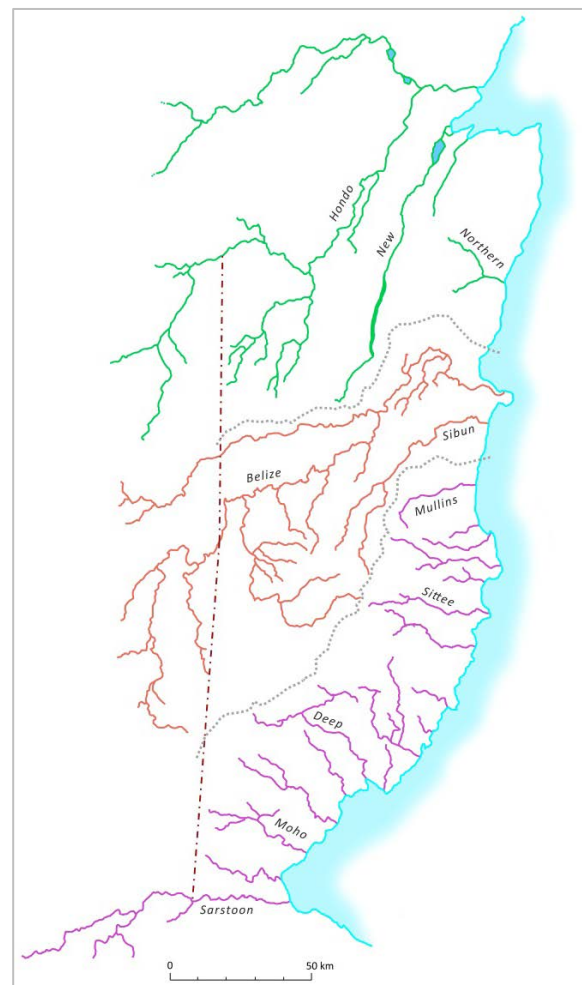


Figure 1. The three archaeological regions of Belize, defined hydrologically according to contiguous watersheds, each coloured differently, with drainage divides marked by dotted lines. The range of peaks in the Maya Mountains defines the ridgeline separating the central from the southern Belizean watershed, whereas the Yalbac Hills and the marshy lowlands form the drainage divide between the central and northern watersheds (map by Christophe Helmke).

the New River and the Northern River. Analogously, Southern Belize is defined by the Sartoon, Temash, Moho and Río Grande in Toledo, as well as the many smaller rivers draining off the Maya Mountains in the Bladen and the Cockscomb, from the Golden Stream at the south to the Mullins River at the north (Figure 1).

Corpora

Based on these definitions of the three major cultural regions of Belize, Central Belize can be described in a twofold fashion. With the plethora of polities along the course of the Belize River to the north (especially in the Upper Belize Valley, to the west), as well as gargantuan Caracol, with extensive roadways and its many satellites, in the southern part of the same region (Figure 2). The most substantial corpus of carved monuments in this region, and Belize as a whole, is that of Caracol, which consists of 27 stelae, 25 altars, 5 ballcourt markers, a hieroglyphic stair as well as a series of painted texts in tombs, stucco texts on architecture and inscribed portable objects. This is in part a reflection of the size and importance of the site, since there is a rather unsophisticated correlation between the size of a site and the number of monuments encountered (see Andres *et al.* 2014: Table 1; Helmke *et al.* 2015c). On account of its size and importance, the corpus of Caracol has been treated independently, providing a rich and abundant historical record (see Martin and Grube 2000; Grube and Martin 2004). The cornerstone of Caracol epigraphy is the study by Carl Beetz and Linton Satterthwaite (1981), supplemented by the state-of-the-art papers of Stephen Houston (1987, 1991), Nikolai Grube (1994), as well as Arlen and Diane Chase (Chase *et al.* 1991). Additional epigraphic treatments of recently discovered monuments have appeared in a more piecemeal fashion (Helmke *et al.* 2006; Chase and Chase 2015; Helmke *in press a*; Helmke *et al.* *in press a*). Whereas retrospective texts place the foundation of the Caracol dynasty at AD 331 (Chase *et al.* 1991: 6; Helmke *et al.* 2006: 12, 14, Table 1), contemporaneous dates preserved on monuments span from AD 400 (Stela 20) to 884 (Altar 26), thereby bridging the better part

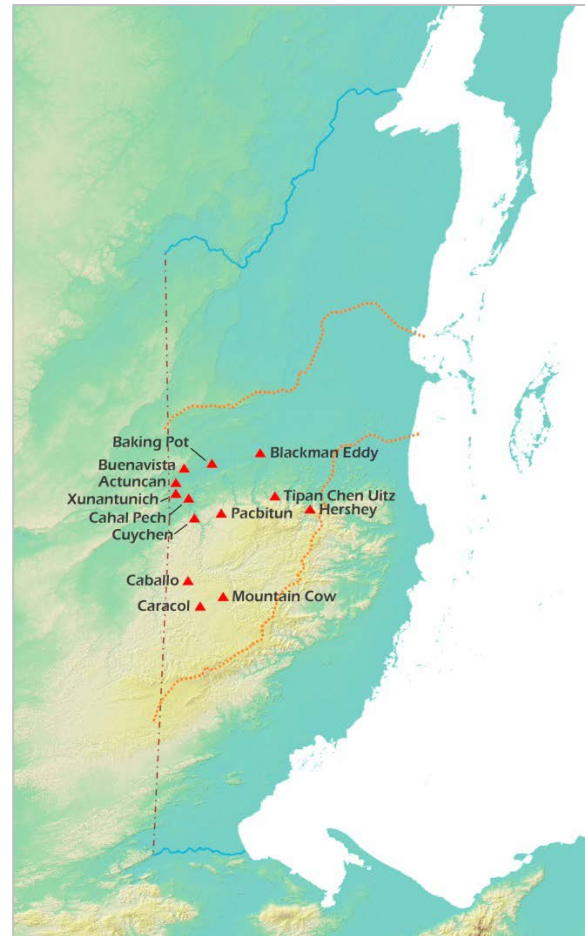


Figure 2. Map of Belize showing the extent of the Central Belizean region (as defined by the stippled line along the drainage divide), showing the location of sites where glyphic texts have been found (map by Christophe Helmke).

of the last five centuries of the Classic period (Table 1).

The considerably smaller corpus of glyphic texts for Belize Valley sites consists of a series of carved monuments, including stelae (N = 7), altars (N = 2), and a selection of panels (N = 4), ballplayer panels (N = 2), and other monuments (N = 2), conjointly found at the sites of Actuncan, Blackman Eddy, Cahal Pech, Pacbitun, Tipan Chen Uitz and Xunantunich (Figure 2) (see Table 1). The standing monuments of Xunantunich were documented by Ian Graham in the 1970s (Graham 1978), and some of the earlier finds were studied by Nikolai Grube (Awe and Grube 2001; Grube and McGovern 1995), with preliminary treatments also offered by Paul Healy (1990) and James

Table 1. Chronology of date hieroglyphic texts on carved stone monuments and portable objects in Central Belize (compiled by Christophe Helmke and Julie Hoggarth).

| Site: Monument / Object | Calendar Round | Long Count | Date | Dating Basis |
|---|----------------------|-------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| Cahal Pech: Stela 9 | — | — | Late Preclassic | Iconographic style |
| Actuncan: Stela 1 | — | — | Protoclassic | Iconographic style |
| Blackman Eddy: Stela 1 | — | 8.17.5.?.10 | AD 381-382 | Long Count |
| Caracol: Stela 20 | 12 # | 8.18.4.#.12 | AD 400 | Long Count |
| Baking Pot: Bedran Group, Vessels 1 & 2 | — | — | AD 450-500 | Paleographic style |
| Pacbitun: Stela 6 | 3 Ajaw 8 Kumk'u | 9.2.10.0.0 | AD 485 | Long Count |
| Pacbitun: Altar 3 | — | — | 5 th century | Paleographic style |
| Cahal Pech, Tomb B1-2/7 | — | — | AD 550-650 | Ceramic dating |
| Xunantunich: Panel 3 | 13 Ajaw 18 K'ank'in | 9.10.10.0.0 | AD 642 | Calendar Round |
| Xunantunich: Panel 4 | 13 Ajaw 18 K'ank'in | 9.10.10.0.0 | AD 642 | Calendar Round |
| Cahal Pech: Str. A1, graffiti | — | — | AD 650-750 | Paleographic style |
| Xunantunich: Panel 1 | # | # | c. AD 670-870 | Paleographic style |
| Cave near Benque Viejo: Polychrome vase | 8 Ajaw 8 Woj | 9.13.0.0.0 | AD 692 | Calendar Round |
| Baking Pot: Str. A1, Cylinder Vase | — | — | AD 693-780 | Naranjo regnal name |
| Caracol: Stela 21 | 7 Ajaw 3 Kumk'u | 9.13.10.0.0 | AD 702 | Long Count |
| Tipan Chen Uitz: Monument 1 | 6 Ajaw 13 Muwan | 9.14.0.0.0 | AD 711 | Calendar Round |
| Tipan Chen Uitz: Monument 3 | 7 Kimi 14 Sek | 9.14.4.9.6 | AD 716 | Calendar Round |
| Cuychen: Cuychen Vase | — | — | AD 700-830 | Paleographic style |
| Xunantunich: Panel 2 | # | # | c. AD 780-820 | Paleographic style |
| Baking Pot: Group B, Komkom Vase | [1 Lamat 16 Sek] | 9.19.1.15.8 | AD 812 | Long Count |
| Xunantunich: Stela 8 | 8 Ajaw 8 [Xul] | 9.19.10.0.0 | AD 820 | Calendar Round |
| Baking Pot: Group B, Barrel-shaped vase | 8 Ajaw 8 Xul | 9.19.10.0.0 | AD 820 | Calendar Round |
| Xunantunich: Stela 9 | 7 [Ajaw] [18 Sip] | 10.0.0.0.0 | AD 830 | Long Count |
| Xunantunich: Stela 1 & Altar 1 | 5 Ajaw [3 K'ayab] | 10.1.0.0.0 | AD 849 | Calendar Round |
| Caracol: Stela 10 | 4 Ajaw [13 K'ank'in] | 10.1.10.0.0 | AD 859 | Calendar Round |
| Caracol: Altar 26 | 8 Ajaw 8 Mol | 10.2.15.0.0 | AD 884 | Calendar Round |

Garber (1992). Since 1996 the epigraphy of most Belize Valley sites has been studied by the author, who in collaboration with Jaime Awe, has offered syntheses of these data as these bear on the geo-political situation and dynastic history of the area (Helmke and Awe 2008, 2012; Helmke *et al.* 2004), in addition to more site-specific studies of individual texts and monuments.

Preclassic

In contrast to the large corpus of Caracol, that of the Belize Valley is considerably smaller

and yet exhibits some of the earliest monuments (Table 1), not only from Central Belize, but also from the central Maya Lowlands as a whole. The two earliest are carved Preclassic stelae found at Cahal Pech and Actuncan (Table 1). Although both lack text, they are finely carved in an early style. What is undoubtedly the earlier of the two, Stela 9 from Cahal Pech, depicts a ruler emerging from the maw of a supernatural feline, replete with a serpentine bifid tongue. The iconography of this stela is fascinating for the hybridity of its style, showing a transitional form between the large stucco

masks of deities and the supernatural that adorn temple structures in the Late Preclassic, and the Classic period focus on the ruler as the sole subject of representation (Awe *et al.* 2009; Awe and Grube 2001). Preserving the depictions of the deities of old, the king is now seen as emerging from these, supporting and validating his rule, and anticipating the figural motifs of the ensuing Classic period. Subsequent to its breakage, this stela was atavistically buried in a Late Classic masonry tomb at the Zopilote causeway terminus complex, located 670 m south of the site core (Awe *et al.* 2009).

The Protoclassic (c. 200 BC-AD 200) Actuncan stela reflects the iconography of the Classic period, depicting a ruler brandishing a rigid ceremonial bar, although the dynamic stance, with legs apart, is analogous to the earliest Preclassic monuments of the region (Grube and McGovern 1995; Fahsen and Grube 2005: 79), including the carved stelae of Cival (Grube and Martin 2004: II.5), and Nakum (Žralka *et al.* in press). Both of these stone monuments provide evidence for increasing social stratification, as encoded in complex symbolism and representational conventions, and testify to the incipience and expansion of centralized rulership across the region.

Early Classic

The first monuments to bear glyphic texts are the Early Classic stelae of Blackman Eddy, Caracol and Pacbitun. During this period, polities of Central Belize participated in the same tradition of monument erection as their neighbours in the central Lowlands, yet this process was interrupted for the Belize Valley by the close of the fifth century. The earliest monument of the period is the fully-glyphic Stela 1 of Blackman Eddy that carries the Long Count date of 8.17.5.?.10, corresponding to a date between AD 381 and 382 (Helmke *et al.* 2004; see also Garber 1992) (Figure 3). This is followed, by the erection of Stela 20 at Caracol in AD 400, showing the ruler, in intricate regalia, styled as an *Uxwitza' Ajaw* or 'three-mountain-place king', in reference to the ancient toponym of Caracol (Chase and Chase 2005: 30, 32, Fig. 8; Stuart and Houston 1994: 52, Fig. 63). A little more than eight decades later, Stela 6 was erected at Pacbitun on 9.2.10.0.0,

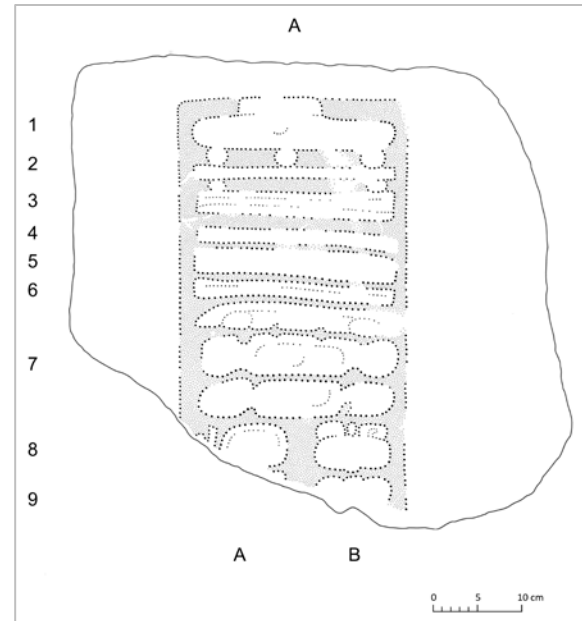


Figure 3. Stela 1 of Blackman Eddy, the earliest glyphic monument of Belize to bear a legible date (drawing by Christophe Helmke).

commemorating the half-k'atun of AD 485 (Helmke *et al.* 2006; see also Healy 1990). This stela depicts a seated king, possibly at his accession, on the occasion of the appropriate calendrical station. The smaller caption to the scene is most remarkable, since it may record the earliest known "agency expression" (see Martin and Grube 1995).¹ This may indicate that the accession of the local Pacbitun king took place under the aegis of a superordinate king (Helmke *et al.* 2006: 74). Based on the dynamic political environment in the Maya Lowlands at that time, Tikal emerges as the most likely candidate, and although eroded, the faint traces of the name of the contemporaneous king can be discerned in the text. This would mark Pacbitun as a vassal of Tikal at this early date, in much the same way as the kings of Caracol pleaded fealty to Tikal until the marked reversals of the sixth century (Martin and Grube 2000: 88; Houston 1991). Thought to have originally been paired with Stela 6 is Altar 3, which equally represents the local king of Pacbitun in majesty, standing upon the ancient toponym of the site (Helmke and Awe 2008: 73-74; Skaggs *et al.* 2017).

The Belize Valley is geographically positioned between the competing superordinate centres of Naranjo to the west and Caracol to the

south. As such, it should come as no surprise that a variety of portable objects and glyphic evidence suggest that sites in the Belize Valley were caught in a tug-of-war between Naranjo and Caracol. A close scrutiny of this evidence indicates that, whereas the power and influence of Caracol is discernible in the Early Classic, that of Naranjo is readily apparent in the Late Classic, especially from the seventh century onwards (Helmke and Awe 2008: 78-86).

Dated to the middle or late fifth century are two beautifully inscribed ceramic vessels discovered in a burial at the Bedran Group, in the western periphery of Baking Pot (Colas *et al.* 2002; Helmke and Awe 2012: 65-66). These ceramics are remarkable for the quality of their glyphic texts, representing some of the earliest examples of dedicatory inscriptions (i.e., Primary Standard Sequences) anywhere in the Maya Lowlands. The texts indicate that the vessels were both intended for *kakaw*-based beverages, one of which had been owned by a royal figure named *Lem? Tz'unun Tok Suutz'*. What is most interesting is the regnal name of this figure, the name received upon his accession, which might be read as *Tum? Yohl K'inich*—a regnal name that was favoured by the kings of Caracol (Helmke and Awe 2008: 85-86).

The sherd of a Saxche Orange-polychrome bowl (dated AD 550-650), recovered in the northern reaches of the epicentral settlement of Baking Pot, is also remarkable in this regard since it may bear the eroded dynastic title of Caracol along its rim (Helmke *et al.* 2018). Based on present evidence, this may be the fourth example of a ceramic vessel to bear this dynastic title, making the find all the more exceptional. Use of this title suggests that a king of Caracol—either *Yajawte' K'inich* II or his son K'an II, given the dates of this ceramic type—was the original owner of the bowl and the presence of this vessel at Baking Pot hints at a contemporaneous relation, perhaps an alliance, between the two sites.

This connection between Baking Pot and Caracol is expressed not only in the realm of royal onomastics and glyphic ceramics, but also by the appearance of certain ritualistic features such as the practice of finger bowl caching. Offerings containing severed fingers,

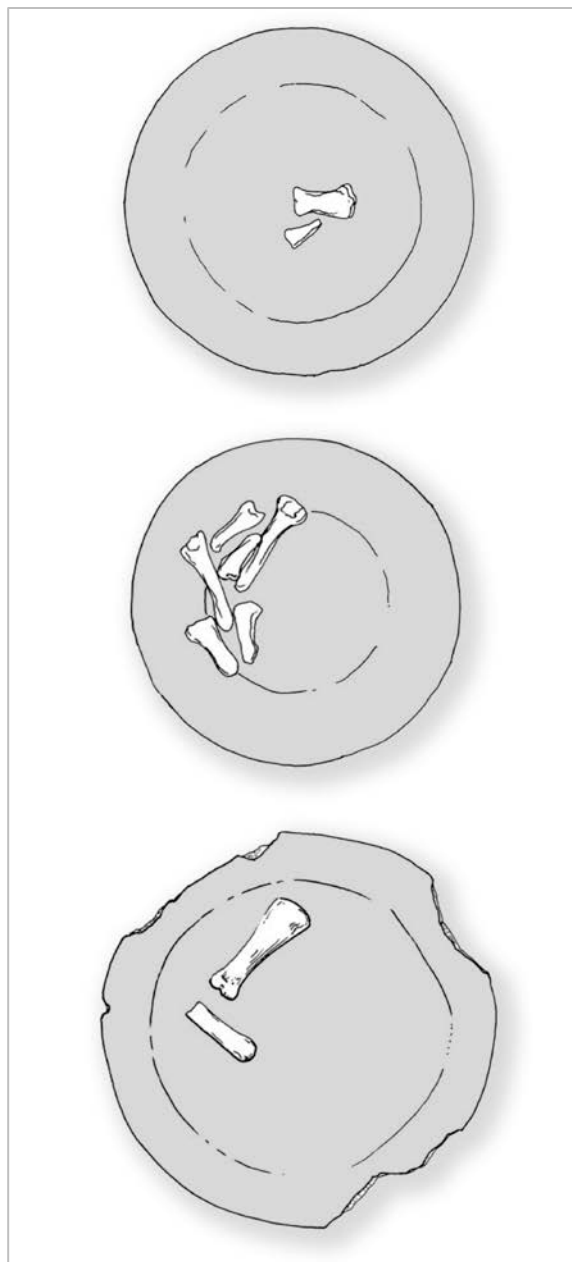


Figure 4. A selection of finger bowls from the recent excavations into the core of the summit platform of the Canna at Caracol, showing human digits within individual ceramic vessels (after Chase and Chase 2018: Figs. 11-13).

individually deposited within small, purpose-made offering vessels is typical for Caracol (Chase 2004: 328-330; Chase and Chase 1998: 308-310, 319, Fig. 5) (Figure 4) and appears for the first time in the Belize Valley in an Early Classic cache at Baking Pot, placed within a circular masonry altar at the site's southern causeway terminus group (Audet and Awe 2005; Awe and Helmke 2005: 44).

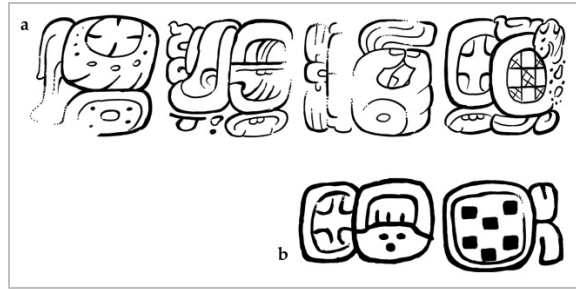


Figure 5. The Cahal Pech dynastic title: a) The glyphic text inscribed into one of the rings found at Cahal Pech, naming the original owner as K'awiil Chan K'inich, bearing the local dynastic title of K'an Hix ...w. b) Detail of the jadeite plaque found at Nim li Punit with the same dynastic title (drawings by Christophe Helmke).

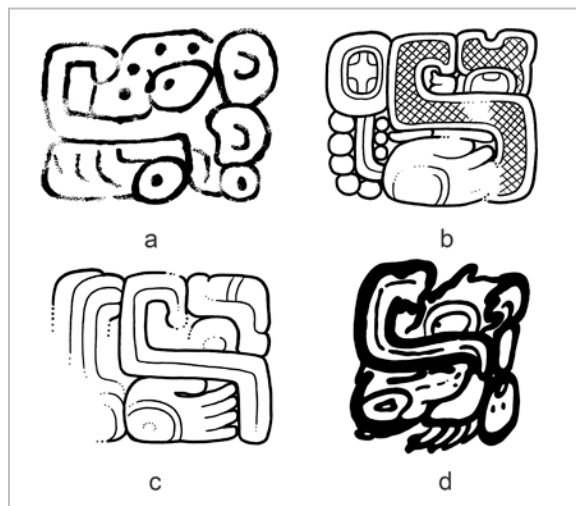


Figure 6. The mythic founder of the Naranjo dynasty, known as the Square-Nosed Beastie. a) Probable example rendered on the jadeite plaque found at Nim li Punit, b) Tikal, Lintel 2, Temple 4, c) Naranjo, Stela 24, left side, and d) Black-on-cream bowl K2358 (drawings by Christophe Helmke).

The same type of finger bowls were also found in the entombment of Stela 9 at Cahal Pech (Awe 2013), suggesting another Late Classic phase of Caracol influence on Belize Valley sites (Helmke and Awe 2008: 84-85). The reappearance of this typical Caracol ritual feature may be the direct result of martial incursions made into the area by Caracol at the start of the eighth century. This is suggested by Stela 21 at Caracol, which shows a triumphant king standing above a bound captive that may be the king of Pacbitun, one *Chanal Chak Wak* ('celestial red centipede'), as identified in the accompanying glyphic caption (Helmke and Awe 2008: 74-75). Stela 6 and Altar 3 at

Pacbitun were both damaged and displaced from their original contexts in antiquity and it is tempting to see this destruction as wrought by Caracol during the same military incursion (Skaggs *et al.* 2017).

Late Classic

Despite the punctuated influence of Caracol at the start of the eighth century, the Late Classic would see most sites in the Belize Valley turn their attention to the west, towards Naranjo. It is during this time that many of the larger sites in the Belize Valley reached their apogee, as made manifest by expansive construction efforts and important royal tombs. At Cahal Pech, a lavish royal burial dating to the seventh century, was found in Structure B1, the central pyramid of the eastern triadic complex. This tomb included a wealth of ceramic vessels as well as a series of carved objects, including bone rings and incised turtle plastrons bearing the name *K'awiil Chan K'inich*, naming one of the site's Late Classic rulers who was styled by a local dynastic title as *K'an Hix ...w* (Awe and Zender 2016) (Figure 5a).

The same title has recently documented on a large jadeite plaque found at the site of Nim li Punit, describing the mother of the original owner as a *K'an Hix ...w* (Glyph Blocks 13-14), implying that she was related to the Cahal Pech lineage through kinship (Prager and Braswell 2016: 271) (Figure 5b). As to the father of the plaque's owner, we are given the relatively plain and youthful title of *winakhaab ch'aho'm* 'k'atun man' (18-19), preceded by the head of a zoomorphic creature combining various elements (17). Most prominent is the squared nose, and the element that it clenches in its mouth, which resembles the lateral view of a human hand. Together these are features of the so-called Square-Nosed Beastie (Figure 6), a supernatural entity that is said to be the founder of the Naranjo dynasty (Schele 1992: 140-141; Helmke and Awe 2008: 82-83). In this case, I surmise that this is probably a reference to the king of Naranjo, here referred to by metonymy through the name of the dynastic founder, quite possibly a reference to a late seventh century king of Naranjo (*cf.* Prager and Braswell 2016: 271, 273), such as *K'uxaj Chan K'inich* or *K'ahk' Xiiw Chan Chaahk* (see Martin and

Grube 2008: 72-73; Tokovinine 2007: 19).² If this interpretation is correct, we can see that Naranjo and Cahal Pech may have maintained relatively close relations from as early as the late seventh century, given the marital alliance that this plaque attests to.

This resonates with the small glyphic graffiti that once adorned the back wall of the central room of Str. A1 at Cahal Pech (Helmke and Awe 2008: Fig. 14). This may well have been the throne room of the royal court and it records among other things a royal accession and the text goes on to mention an ethnonym and the dynastic title of Naranjo (Helmke and Awe 2008: 80-82), presumably in reference to an individual who witnessed the event.

Much as Cahal Pech may have been allied to Naranjo through matrimony, by the second half of the seventh century, the increasing influence of Naranjo is also perceptible at other sites in the Belize Valley. Perhaps the best evidence for direct alliances between sites in the Belize Valley and Naranjo comes from the carved monuments found at Xunantunich. The recent discovery of Panels 3 and 4 offer important information about Late Classic geopolitics in the central Maya Lowlands (Helmke and Awe 2016a, 2016b), especially as these panels once formed part of a grand hieroglyphic stairway that had ostensibly been raised at Caracol in AD 642, under the reign of K'an II (AD 618-658) (Figure 7). With the defeat of Caracol by Naranjo, in AD 680, by the hand of *K'ahk' Xiiw Chan Chaahk*, the monuments of K'an II were battered and broken, the hieroglyphic stair dismantled and pieces transported to allied sites along the triumphal return home, including Ucanal, Xunantunich, and ultimately Naranjo (Helmke and Awe 2018).

With Tikal awakening from the lengthy slumber of the hiatus, the decades that followed were tumultuous, but Naranjo maintained a tacit grasp on sites in western Belize. Among other lines of evidence, this is suggested by a cream-polychrome vase bearing the Calendar Round of 8 Ajaw 8 Woj, corresponding to the important Period Ending of 9.13.0.0.0, or AD 692 (Table 1). Although this vase has been attributed a variety of proveniences, Thomas Gann relates that this vase was found in a cave near Benque Viejo (Gann 1925: 72). Crafted in the style of

Naranjo, the vase may be attributable to the regency of Lady Six Sky, and suggests that she already exerted some influence on sites in the area (Helmke in press b), even before the accession of her son, *K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Chaahk*, the 38th king of Naranjo, in AD 693 (Martin and Grube 2000: 75). The political landscape of the Belize Valley changed radically with his accession. The first few years of the reign of this young king were characterized by warfare and conflict, especially between 693 and 716 when a series of neighbouring sites were duly toppled or set to the torch and a series of adversaries captured. Among these is the site of *Komkom*, which, based on present evidence, may well be located in the Belize Valley (Houston *et al.* 1992: 507-508; Yæger *et al.* 2015: 186-188, in press). While martial accounts of *K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Chaahk* can be read as “a conflagration of the eastern Peten” (Martin and Grube 2000: 76), many of these triumphs may have been intended to reassert vassalage over adjoining polities that had once been in the political ambit of Naranjo rather than true territorial expansion. With the maturity of the king setting in and the reaches of the realm under firmer control, we can see the king setting out to maintain his hard won martial prizes by devoting himself to more diplomatic relations. This is made most patent by the beautiful “Jauncy Vase” discovered in a burial at Buenavista del Cayo (Houston *et al.* 1992). This vase had been the personal drinking cup of the king of Naranjo and was gifted to Buenavista to cement an alliance between the two centres (Houston *et al.* 1992). The same is attested by a vase of Naranjo production that was specifically made for the early eighth king of Ucanal (Helmke *et al.* 2017a: 11, 20-21, Fig. 9). Sherds of precisely the same type of ceramic as the Jauncy Vase have also been discovered at Xunantunich and Baking Pot, suggesting that all three of these sites were allied with Naranjo during the reign of *K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Chaahk* (Helmke *et al.* 2015c).

Related to these practices of gift-giving and alliances is a polychromatic bowl bearing the name and titles of an eighth century king of *Komkom*. Remarkably, the calligraphy of this bowl is nearly identical to the ceramics produced in the workshops tied to the royal court of

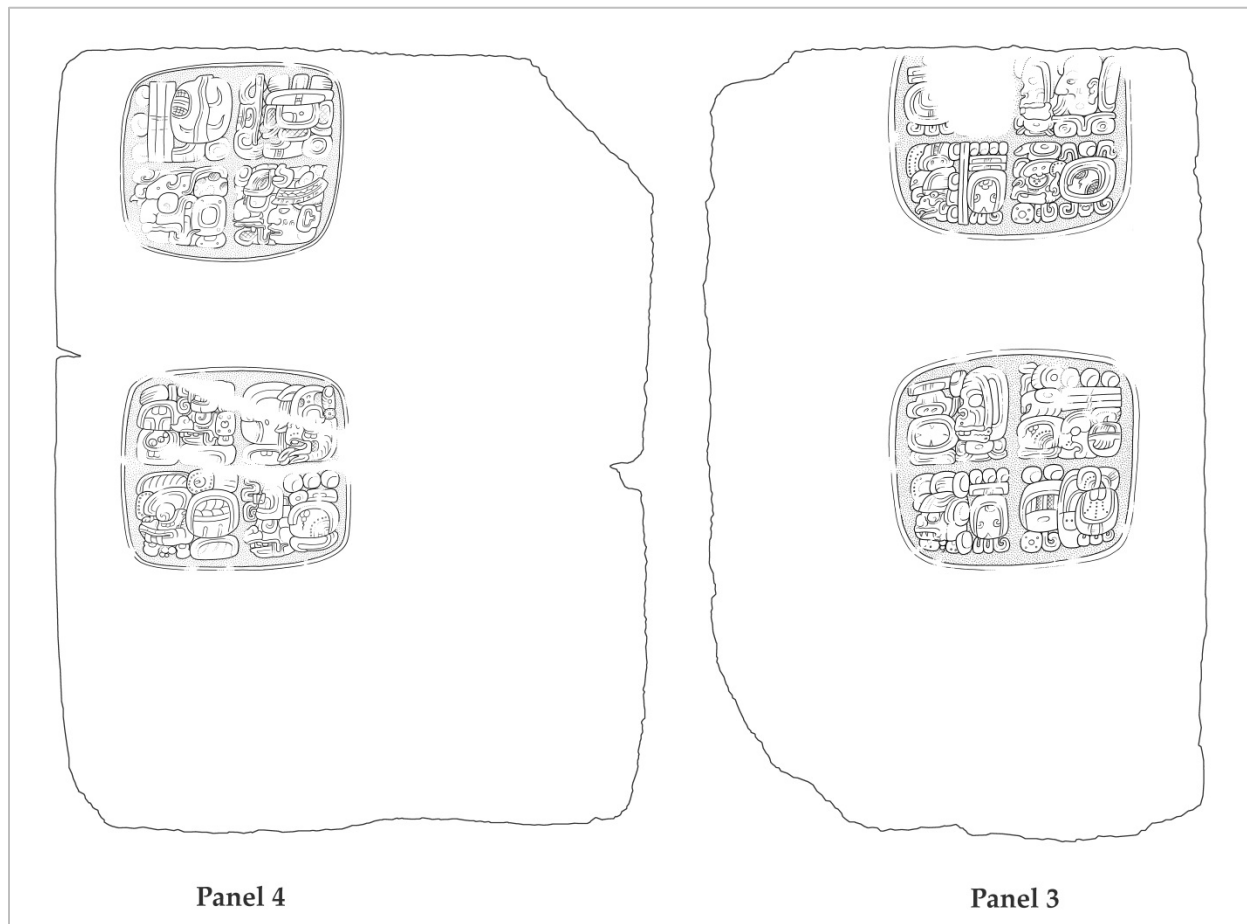


Figure 7. Panels 3 and 4 found at Xunantunich, the original bookends of the hieroglyphic stair raised by Caracol's ruler, K'an II, in AD 642 (drawings by Christophe Helmke).

Naranjo during the eighth century. The closeness of the paleographic features of these glyphic texts, speak not just of geographic proximity, but of the possibility that this is a bespoke bowl made for a king of *Komkom* by a workshop affiliated with Naranjo. This again implies a close and superordinate relation between Naranjo and *Komkom*, in the wake of the defeat of the latter by the former, documented just decades earlier, in AD 696 (see Helmke *et al.* 2017a: 16-22; Yæger *et al.* 2015: 186-187).

Related to the question of ceramics exchanged through gifting and tribute is a specimen found at the site of Hershey, in the Sibun valley. Although not adequately dated at present, the specimen is a small sherd of an incised vase that presents one more piece of evidence of Naranjo influence in the area, based

on the partial Emblem Glyph preserved along its rim (Helmke and Awe 2008: 82; McAnany *et al.* 2004: 297, Fig. 3). Whether this specimen represents direct contact between these two sites, or more down-the-line exchange, is unknown, but this specimen in many ways marks the maximal eastern extent of Naranjo influence in central Belize.

With the ascendancy of a number of sites during the Late Classic, we also see the emergence of several truly important centres, such as Tipan Chen Uitz, with its large monumental epicentre, network of causeways linked to satellite sites, and the presence of carved monuments gracing the grand stairway to one of the site's large acropole complexes (Andres *et al.* 2014). The glyphic text that adorns Monument 1 labels this large slab as an emulation in stone, as a skeuomorph or

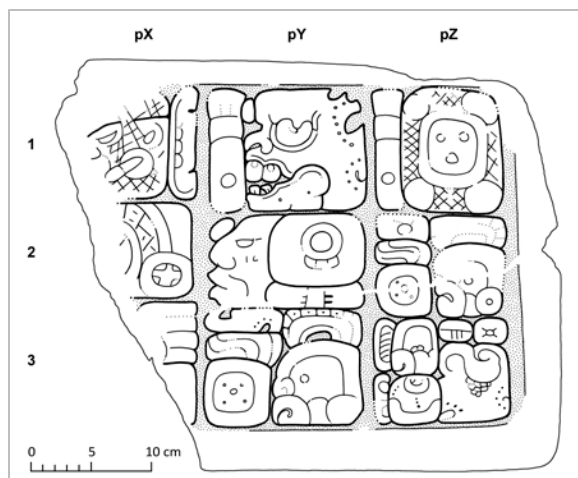


Figure 8. Panel 2 found displaced within Str. A32 on the Castillo at Xunantunich (drawing by Christophe Helmke).

simulacra, of a royal palanquin, and provides the dedicatory date of AD 711 (Andres *et al.* 2014: 55-60). Only part of the initial segment of the text is preserved, the remainder awaiting discovery. In addition, a series of evocative ballplayer panels, which together must have formed part of a hieroglyphic stair, have also been found (Andres *et al.* 2017). These depict elite individuals in the act of playing the ballgame, lunging to return the ball and bracing for impact. The associated glyphic captions provide a date that suggests that this ballgame event transpired in AD 716 (Helmke *et al.* 2015a: 15). The name of the individual depicted on Monument 4, *Janaab Uti' Chanal K'ahk'*, is reproduced in part on the ballgame ring found at Naranjo (Helmke *et al.* 2015a: 17-18). The juxtaposition of names, on ballgame-related monuments suggests that we may be looking at one and the same individual, one presumably hailing from Naranjo, who interacted with lords of Tipan Chen Uitz as part of this fateful ballgame. Yet, aside from interactions with Naranjo, these ballplayer panels and the presence of a hieroglyphic stair suggest more far-reaching connections and networks of allegiance, since these are preferentially found at sites under the influence of the Snake kings of *Kanu'l*, between the seventh and ninth centuries (Helmke *et al.* 2015a: 21-24).

In terms of allegiances, one of the most interesting texts is that adorning Panel 2, at Xunantunich (Figure 8). It was found broken and in a secondary context within Structure A32,

the large *audiencia* fronting the Castillo at the site. Although partial, this monument may have served as a riser to a more extensive text, forming part of the riser of an inscribed step. The end of the text records a series of three toponyms, which initially suggested some sort of martial allegiance (Helmke *et al.* 2010: 104-107; Helmke and Awe 2008: 71-72). All the more intriguing considering the “flint-and-shield” expression that preceded this list (pY1-pZ1), since this construction is typically used in the context of warfare (Houston 1983). Complicating a clear understanding of this clause is the absence of a well-defined verb at the onset. However, closer scrutiny of this text in recent years reveals that rather than a martial allegiance as was initially assumed, this text instead records a ritual event. These types of rituals are typically recorded by making a stative statement that a particular individual is *ubahila'an ta k'uh* or ‘depicted in the guise of a god’ (Nehammer Knub *et al.* 2009), and precisely the same is found in the text of Xunantunich Panel 2 (written as **BAH[AN]** at pX2). In keeping with this reading, the constituent parts of the “flint-and-shield” expression are each preceded by a preposition, identifying the individual conducting the ritual as one attired *as* a warrior, and undoubtedly impersonating an aspect of the solar deity *K'inich Ajaw* (pX3) (see Helmke *et al.* 2010: 104, 2015b: 23-24). The text closes with a title ascribed to the kings of Xunantunich. Re-examining the monument in 2017, the author and Simon Martin noted that this was written **ka-ta-{u}-tzi-WITZ-AJAW** (pY3b-pZ3), clarifying the partly broken grapheme and thereby providing the new reading of *ka-ta-uutz witz ajaw*. This may involve an initial second person plural pronominal prefix *ka-*, preceding the toponym *Ta-uutz Witz*, or ‘at the good mountain’. Taken together this can probably be translated as ‘our *Tauutz Witz* king’.³

When it comes to the final resting places of kings, an impressive number of elaborate Late Classic tombs containing a wealth of imported grave goods have also been identified at Baking Pot, including two tombs located atop the central structure of the eastern triadic architectural assemblage in Group A (Audet 2006). These finds, as well as extensive evidence for

monumental construction dating to the Late Classic period in the royal palace complex, suggest that sites such as Baking Pot reached their economic and political apogees between AD 600 and 750. That allegiances endured beyond the reign of Naranjo's *Kahk' Tiliw Chan Chaahk*, is suggested by a miniature vase found in a burial at the summit of Structure A1 in the northern group at Baking Pot. This small vase is made in a style that is typical of the royal workshops of Naranjo, the name of the original owner being clearly recorded as *K'ahk' ... Chan Chaahk*, the distinctive regnal name of Late Classic Naranjo kings, especially between AD 693 and 780 (see Martin and Grube 2000: 75-81). Based on the remaining features of the name, as well as ceramic associations, I believe that this is a vase that once belonged to *K'ahk' Ukalaw Chan Chaahk*—the son of *K'ahk' Tiliw*—who ruled from AD 755 until sometime around 780 (Helmke and Awe 2008: 79-80; Martin and Grube 2000: 80-81). As such, we can see that the royalty of Baking Pot maintained allegiances with the kings of Naranjo for most of a century, over the reign of at least two consecutive kings.

Terminal Classic

Despite the close connection with Naranjo, Baking Pot also maintained relations with other peers. Among these, were the kings of *Komkom*, as is made clear by the fully-glyphic vase, discovered recently in a peri-abandonment deposit at the foot of Structure B7, the *audiencia* of the royal palace in Group B at Baking Pot (Hoggarth *et al.* 2016; Helmke *et al.* 2017b) (Figure 9a). Based on the pedigree recorded at the end of the text we can see that the original owner was a king of *Komkom*, the aforementioned subsidiary court known from ceramic vessels and references made to this site in the monuments of Naranjo. The owner of the Komkom Vase was the son of *Sak Witzil Baah*, the king of *Komkom*, and of *Ixchanal Lem?* a princess of Naranjo (Helmke *et al.* 2017b: 231). Whereas the name of the original owner is not detailed on the vase found at Baking Pot, another polychromatic vessel bearing the same titles, and written with many of the same calligraphic traits, is the bowl designated as K2730 in the photographic archives of Justin



Figure 9. Terminal Classic ceramics attesting to the influence and interaction of Baking Pot with peer-polities. a) The Komkom Vase discovered in a peri-abandonment deposit at the foot of Str. B7 at Baking Pot (section and photograph by Christophe Helmke). b) The barrel-shaped vase naming Waxaklajun Ubah K'awil of Naranjo in connection with the Period Ending celebrations of AD 810 and 820 (photograph by Julie Hoggarth).

Kerr (Kerr 1990: 276; Helmke *et al.* in press b). This bowl had been owned by a *Komkom* king named *Kamal Xok*, and based on the close equivalences between the bowl and the vase, I venture to speculate that these had once formed a set, and that the *Komkom* Vase was once owned by him as well.

The glyphic text on the beautiful vase found at Baking Pot is unique for its length—being the longest glyphic text committed to a ceramic vessel—and also for its late date of manufacture. The whole text is unusually headed by an Initial Series, including the Long Count date 9.19.1.15.8, corresponding to AD 812 (Table 1). In addition to length and relative lateness, the text is also unique in several other points. Unlike monuments that recount events that are separated by intervals of months and years, the account on the vase is narrated as a series of events that transpired just days apart. In terms of narrative, it provides an unparalleled account of war and conflict in the eastern Maya Lowlands, detailing events from the spring and summer of AD 799. This was a period of intense warfare pitting Naranjo against Yaxha, and the *Komkom* Vase describes the involvement of that court in these same conflicts in a fast-paced and enthralling narrative. In many ways, the account appears to start in the thick of it, *in media res* as it were. As such, we gain the impression that much of the introductory portions of the narrative are omitted, leaving these as background information that must have already been known by the intended audience and users of the vase. It may also be that the text on the *Komkom* Vase is a copy of codical annal, with only select and favoured passages copied to the vase, leaving all opening and intermittent materials aside (Helmke *et al.* in press b).

Whereas the vase dutifully records the appearance of a range of different actors, most of them only referred to by title alone—a peculiar feature of the vase—no major protagonist emerges from the narrative recorded, although it seems clear that this is an account of history from the vantage of the kings of *Komkom*. Interestingly, the contemporaneous king of Naranjo, “Itzamnaaj” *K’awil* is nowhere named on this narrative—a salient omission. In contrast, the near-identical events related on Stela 12 at Naranjo credit—perhaps

unsurprisingly—not the king of *Komkom*, but exclusively the king of Naranjo. On Stela 12, *K’inich Lakamtuun*, the king of Yaxha, is singled out as the antagonist of “Itzamnaaj” *K’awil*. As a means of introducing cadence and comic irony, almost satirical humour, nearly each martial event is followed by a secondary sub-clause that reads *ahn-Ø K’inich Lakamtuun*, ‘he ran, *K’inich Lakamtuun*’. As a narrative motif, and its pervasive repetition in the text of Stela 12, it serves to humiliate the king of Yaxha, dishonouring him and marking him contemptibly as the target of all jokes, since he is said to have fled from each encounter. Thus, clearly, the two historical sources provide two very different accounts of the same events, one presented in nearly raw and minute detail, whereas the other was the subject of considerable emendation to make it suitable for record on a public monument. As such, we are given a riveting account of warfare and political intrigue that involves the polities of the eastern central Lowlands and Belize Valley sites in particular.

While the *Komkom* Vase attests to relations with allies during the reign of Naranjo’s “Itzamnaaj” *K’awil*, allegiances between Baking Pot and Naranjo continued unabated. This is attested by a polychromatic barrel-shaped vase bearing the name of *Waxaklajun Ubah K’awil*, which has been found in another peri-abandonment deposit in Courtyard 4, within the palatial complex of Group B at Baking Pot (Helmke *et al.* 2015c) (Figure 9b). This is the last known ruler of Naranjo and is otherwise only known from Stela 32 that he erected at Naranjo to commemorate the period ending of AD 820. Yet, an eroded mention to him on Stela 8 at Xunantunich in connection with a dance ritual celebrated with the local lord, at precisely the same date, suggests that the king of Naranjo may actually have celebrated this important period ending not at his own capital, but at that of a vassal (Helmke *et al.* 2010). We suppose that this was to foster bonds with a vassal and to ensure the continued propitiation of political favour in a time of increasingly decentralized royal power. Despite efforts to maintain the *status quo* and order of old, the kings of Xunantunich endured for only a few decades until the erection of Stela

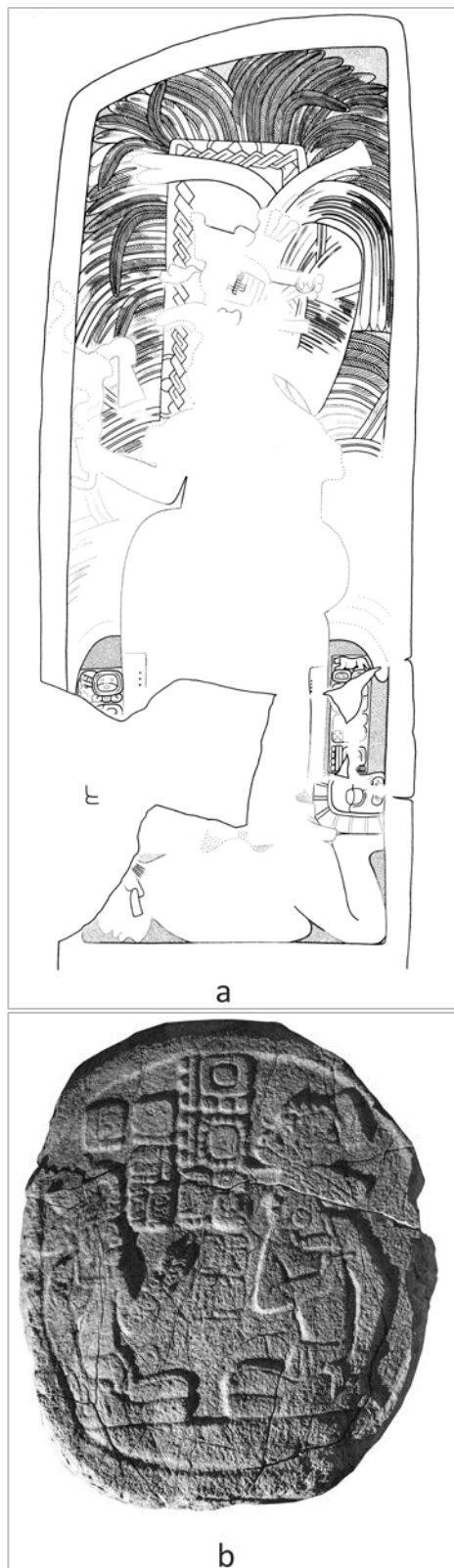


Figure 10. The latest monuments of Central Belize: a) Stela 1 of Xunantunich (drawing by Ian Graham with amendments by Christophe Helmke) and b) Altar 26 (photograph by Christophe Helmke).

1 in AD 849 and Altar 1, with which it was paired (Helmke *et al.* 2010: 113-120) (Figure 10a).

Farther south, the Terminal Classic proved to be a period of resilience for the kings of Caracol, dedicating monuments both within the epicentre and at outlying satellites (Chase *et al.* 1991; Chase and Chase 2015). One of these kings dedicated an altar at Mountain Cow in AD 835, before raising his Stela 17 and Altar 10 in an outlying group AD 849 (Martin and Grube 2000: 99). The last known rulers of the site are attested by the all-glyphic Stela 10 that was raised in the middle of Plaza A in AD 859 (Houston 1987: Fig. 71b, 95), and Altar 26, dated to as late as AD 884 (Chase and Chase 2015) (Figure 10b). After these monuments, the historical record of the region ceases and is utterly mute.

¹ This particular example this may be written **u-KAB-ji**, thereby duplicating the contemporaneous spellings seen on Tikal Stela 31, possibly cueing the transcription *ukab[aa]j*, for what may be a more archaic surface form of the agency expression, without the enclitic *-iyy*, of the more common *u-kab-j-iyy*.

² A similar onomastic precedence is found in reference to Tikal, where some sixth century kings are also referred to obliquely by the name of the dynastic founder, Yax Ehb Xook (Grube and Martin 2000: 26, 39; Martin 2001: 8, 2005: 5-6). In the case of Naranjo, its defeat at the hands of Tikal in AD 744 is also referred to by a Star War against 'the city of the godly Square-Nosed Beastie' (see Martin 1996: 225; Martin and Grube 2000: 79). The mythic founders of dynasties could thereby, by metonymy, exemplify the rulers of the dynasty and the city that they ruled.

³ The initial set of phonograms **ka-ta**, could yield the transcription *kat*, as was initially suggested (Helmke *et al.* 2010:106). Yet, the putative lexeme *kat* does not tie to any productive cognates in lowland Mayan languages and is thereby an improbable reading. The segment **ta-u-tzi-WITZ** should probably be transcribed as *ta uutz witz*, together yielding the toponym, preceded by a locative preposition *ta*, 'at'. The 'mountain', *witz*, is modified by the adjective *uutz* 'good', together prompting the translation 'at the good mountain'.

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